GLOBAL BEAT FUSION: Journeymen

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by Derek Beres

Gypsy Caravan, a new documentary about a six-week tour featuring some of modernity's top Gypsy musicians, is an exceptional peek at life on the road, enlivened with the history, and current state, of Gypsy culture.

When the Road Bends: Tales of the Road: A Gypsy's story of the modern Gypsy journey, a new documentary about a six-week tour featuring some of modernity's top Gypsy musicians, is an exceptional peek at life on the road, enlivened with the history, and current state, of Gypsy culture.

And traveled the Rom did, to Persia in the ninth century, and soon after up the Balkan trail into Eastern Europe. Today Gypsy culture is global; the term comes from economic and social standing as much as ancestry, as well speaking the Romani language. Why, exactly, the seemingly random journeying of a lower-class population should even deserve attention seems confusing, until we recognize one simple fact, regarding the influence of their travels: they are the very soul of each culture they touch.

While today we view Gypsies in an exotic manner, as mysterious and prophetic ball-gazing women and beaten hat-wearing men involved in professions of trade and thievery, the reality is more a matter of media. Being 

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What proves most interesting is watching these kings and queens on
expressions they assume in performance.

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clarinet and Eastern European ensembles—one brass-based, the other by accordion,
dholak outfits perform besides—and sometimes with—each other visually and
soundtrack (released on World Village). Seeing these seemingly disparate
amazing, and most of the songs are captured on the accompanying
which the underlying themes are told. Footage and sound quality are
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this statement itself is ambiguous, Rom culture certainly has taken advantage,
helping creating the folk musics of India, Spain, and the Balkans over the past
ten or 11 centuries. In celebration of this cross-continental journey, World
Music Institute sponsored a six-week tour featuring some of modernity’s top
Gypsy musicians in 2001 entitled Gypsy Caravan, which became a huge success.

So while the five bands on this tour—Romania’s Taraf de Haidouks and
Fanfare Ciocarlia, Macedonia’s Esma Redzepova, Rajasthan’s Maharaja, and
Andalucía’s Antonio el Pipa Flamenco Ensemble—are not yet household names in America, the tour exposed
many to their incredibly rich, textured, and extremely diverse sounds.
Just as this tour defined Gypsy music in America, the recent documentary
"When the Road Bends: Tales of Gypsy Caravan, which became a huge success.

The film’s subtitle comes from a Romani proverb (“You cannot walk straight when the road bends”) and was shot by a team including legendary documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles. Director Jasmine Dellal has created an exceptional peek at life on the road, entwined with the
history, and current state, of Gypsy culture. There is so much vibrancy to
each character, and so much depth to their relationships, that every bend
this film takes proves riveting.

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which the underlying themes are told. Footage and sound quality are
amazing, and most of the songs are captured on the accompanying
soundtrack (released on World Village). Seeing these seemingly disparate outfits perform besides—and sometimes with—each other visually and
aurally weaves them together. The connection between a harmonium- and
dholak-led group of Rajasthan desert dwellers and the fire of two large
Eastern European ensembles—one brass-based, the other by accordion,
clarinet and cimbalom—is internally felt, and experienced. You can hear it
in the exaggerated, soulful wails of their voices, and in the vibrant
expressions they assume in performance.
stage, at one moment performing a confident, regal music, and returning with them home. This is where the film’s great strength lies. It does not stop by merely taking snapshots on the bus and in hotels, and of course, on stage. Each band is followed to their villages, and they wax realistic on what their lives mean, what this music means. There is an intimate scene with the charismatic violinist and vocalist of Taraf, Nicholae Neascu, where he explains how the money he earns supports more than a simple nuclear family—as well as his admitting that he was happy to have found fame later in life, when most of his mistakes have already been made.

And of course the course of Juana al del Pipa’s life, where drugs destroyed her family and her faith in God brought them back. Watching her wail in the rehearsal studio, as Antonio is instructing dancers, is one of those truly special scenes that can only be captured in one take, at one time. The time then becomes timeless. The same goes for the desert homes of Maharaja, and the economic hardships they face while forging a career in music. The scene where one of the singers mimics a flamenco dance, to everyone’s laughter, is another special moment.

The storyline is well known: tragedy and struggle to create something beautiful and eternal—music. This is what strings together these multicultural Gypsies, in the same fashion that it ties us all together. Gypsy Caravan is a compellingly human story, gorgeously shot and magnificently edited. It tells the story this geography-deprived culture has wanted to tell for some time. It is not that the Rom are without homes; in fact, they have created some of the tightest and most loving familial communities known—something that America, a country where emotions are expressed by what you own and can materially provide, should take note of. These people provide each other with love, endless amounts of it, and inject that furious passion straight into their music. As one of the members of Fanfare mentions, Gypsy culture is something you just feel. In this case, as in many, the feeling far outweighs the words.

Gypsy Caravan Official site

When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan trailer

Derek Beres is the author of Global Beat Fusion: The History of the Future of Music, a book discussing the new world mythology being created by global electronica. His photojournalism has appeared in dozens of magazines, focused on the international music scene. As part of GlobeSonic Sound System he has traveled the planet DJing with the top names in world music. He is also a Vinyasa yoga instructor at Equinox Fitness in Manhattan. Currently he is preparing two books for publication in early 2007, Tangled Web: The Best Music Tour You Never Heard Of, about his month-long journey with the Musica Fresca tour, and A Staircase of Words, a book of essays alongside writer Dax-Devlon Ross.

Tagged as: antonio el pipa flamenco ensemble | esma redzepova | fanfare ciocarlia | gypsy caravan | maharaja | taraf de hadouks